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### Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

Ben Mulvey

*Nova Southeastern University*, [mulvey@nova.edu](mailto:mulvey@nova.edu)

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## About the Author

**Ben Mulvey**, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences. He received his doctorate in philosophy from Michigan State University with a specialization in political theory and applied ethics and has been a member of the faculty since 1988. He teaches ethics at NSU and is a member of the board of advisors of the Florida Bioethics Network.

## Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

by **Ben Mulvey**

I must start by saying something about the title of this essay. Soon after I agreed to offer a presentation (of which this essay is a revised version), I was asked to submit a title. In an email response to that request I typed the first thing that came into my head, which was “Why Democracy Needs the Humanities.” As it turns out, that title is also the subtitle of a recently published book by Martha Nussbaum, a contemporary American philosopher for whom I have the greatest respect and admiration.<sup>2</sup> I had been looking forward to reading her book in preparation for my presentation. I had it on my Amazon wish list after all. So I guess the title was in my mind. But then I realized I couldn’t read the book, for fear that people would get the impression that I borrowed her title *and* her ideas. As of this writing, I have not read her book, but I am eager to do so.

### The Humanities

I am a philosopher (philosophy is one of the academic disciplines that make up the humanities) and philosophers like to get clear on just what it is they’re talking about before they start talking about it. So what do I mean by the term “the humanities”? As a start, consider these definitions that I found from a very quick search of the web. The humanities are:

- studies intended to provide general knowledge and intellectual skills (rather than occupational or professional skills);
- academic disciplines which study the human condition, using methods that are primarily analytic, critical, or speculative, as distinguished from the mainly empirical approaches of the natural and social sciences;
- the branch of learning that includes the arts, classics, philosophy and history etc., but not the sciences;
- one of three major sub-divisions for a liberal education, which includes such subjects as English, History, Languages, Philosophy, and Religion;
- the study of literature, languages, philosophy, art, etc., as distinguished from math or science;

- the areas of human interest that deal with arts and literature;
- generally courses in the classics, foreign languages, linguistics, literature, philosophy, public speaking, and religion;
- the study of the manmade arts such as art, literacy, music that convey the cultural aspects of humanity.

Here is a particularly thorough definition or description from [the Ohio Humanities Council](#) that captures the essential content of the humanities, while also suggesting why we should study this content:

- The humanities are the stories, the ideas, and the words that help us make sense of our lives and our world. The humanities introduce us to people we have never met, places we have never visited, and ideas that may have never crossed our minds. By showing how others have lived and thought about life, the humanities help us decide what is important in our own lives and what we can do to make them better. By connecting us with other people, they point the way to answers about what is right or wrong, or what is true to our heritage and our history. The humanities help us address the challenges we face together in our families, our communities, and as a nation. ([http://www.ohiohumanities.org/?page\\_id=2](http://www.ohiohumanities.org/?page_id=2))

The core mission of the humanities has always been to address the question of what it means to be a human being. The humanities give nuanced, complex, and ever evolving responses to questions of meaning. As opposed to the scientific question of what it means for humans to live in a physiological sense, the humanities question of meaning is a question about what it means for humans to live humanly, i.e. socially, culturally, politically, and spiritually. In other words, the fundamental question of the humanities is not what it *is* to be human, but what it *means* to be human.

Recently I was listening to a radio interview on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* program and the host, Terry Gross, was talking with the author of a new book about the progress of cancer research. At one point the interviewer asked what new knowledge has impressed the author about cancer. He said that we now know that cancer is really part of our DNA as opposed to being some outside agent, like a virus, that invades the body. So whether or not someone gets cancer is more a matter of certain triggers that are pulled in the body. He then added that this new knowledge was a "profound philosophical" insight. Well, I think he was exactly wrong about that. Knowledge about the structure of DNA and its relationship to cancer is an empirical matter. It is not a philosophical issue at all. It may be a profoundly interesting physiological issue, but it is not a philosophical issue. It is not an issue in the humanities; it is an issue in science. Philosophers don't want to talk about how to unravel the structure of DNA. But they might want to talk about what the structure of DNA means for us.

Works of history, philosophy, poetry, imaginative literature, and religious meditation have pondered and commented upon—and continue to comment and ponder upon—matters of birth and death, freedom and dignity, the meaning of suffering, the obligations of citizenship, the elements of a good flourishing life and other marks of a genuinely human experience. Humanists try to make sense out of what various matters of fact mean for us to be human.

### **Technological Imperatives**

There are interests, inside and outside of the academy, that undermine the value of the humanities, thereby imposing on us particular meanings to our lives not of our choosing. There are those people that consciously argue against the value of the humanities. These people I call *humaniphobes*. And there are what I call *technological imperatives*. These phenomena conspire to marginalize the humanities and to impose definitions and models of what it is to be human that are limiting, misguided, and often stultifying.

What do I mean by the phrase *technological imperative*? Generally, it means that when a technology has a direct and significant impact on human behavior, the most important of which is that it imposes values on us. Values are those beliefs about what we think is important in our lives. Such beliefs shape our behavior. If we believe in the value of honesty, for example, our behavior tends to exhibit truthfulness and openness.

A specific example of a technological imperative would be the phenomenon of Facebook. Everybody knows *Facebook*. Apparently, almost everyone is a member. *Facebook* is a social networking technology that allows people quick and easy access to other people's (their "friends'") information, information that some might find trivial, some might find private. Recently in the media we've seen stories about *Facebook* and our changing views on the value of privacy. *Facebook* has existed for a few years now and it has attracted tens of millions of participants. But here we are. We find ourselves in the midst of a technology (and *Facebook* is only one of many similar sorts of technologies), used by millions, and only now we hear some conversations raising questions about our understanding of privacy.

I think the value of privacy is a defining one for our understanding of what it means to be a human being. Human beings are the kinds of creatures that can make choices. And making choices about what we keep private and what we share are often the most important choices we can make. Should you tell that person sitting next to you in class all semester (or a work colleague) that you love him or her, or should you keep that sentiment to yourself, keep it private?

What those in my generation would consider appropriate behavior consistent with the value of privacy, those in a younger generation, traditional college students, for example, would probably consider woefully protective and conservative. In other words, our collective understanding of the value of privacy is significantly shifting. But it is shifting not as a result of self-conscious and reasoned reflection on the meaning of the value of privacy, it is shifting regardless of our will because of the very pervasiveness of this particular technology. My point here is that this story about *FaceBook* is only one of many examples of a technological imperative, a phenomenon whereby a specific technology dictates our values, thereby shaping our understanding of what it means to be human, of what it means to be us.

So who should decide what an appropriate conception of privacy is? Well, we should. Every one of us. (Should we publish our thoughts about this on *Facebook*?) With all due respect to the good people at *Facebook*, I would rather not have a group of software engineers and entrepreneurs tell me through their technology how to think about myself. The thoughts we reveal on *Facebook* are more or less our own, of course. But the fact that we publish these thoughts in an open forum, thoughts that many have considered to be quite private, is, as I said,

altering our notions of privacy and with that, our notions of what it means to be human. But we should make that decision consciously and collectively. By collectively I mean in part democratically. But in another sense of collectively, I mean that we should make this sort of decision only when we are informed. And to be informed in the relevant sense here is to be cognizant of our poets, novelists, philosophers, historians, and those others making contributions to what we call the humanities. We should be informed about our own values, about what we think is important in terms of forming ourselves as human beings. Such considerations are the essential core of the humanities.

### **Humaniphobia**

The term “humanist” is often used as a synonym for atheist. I would like to use it as someone who pursues some aspect of the disciplined activity that we call the humanities (atheists and believers alike). By the way, debating the existence of god is an example of a humanities issue.

I use the phrase *humaniphobia*, the condition suffered by *humaniphobes*, to describe the condition of those people who fear and, as a result, are hostile to, the humanities. And, as we know, fear often motivates a desire to get rid of that which one fears. *Humaniphobia* has many parallels to racism, a particular form of xenophobia. Have you ever hear someone say, “I’m not a racist, but I would never let my daughter marry a \_\_\_\_.”? Insert whatever ethnic or racial category you like in the blank. Consider the parallel *humaniphobic* comment: “I have nothing against the humanities, but I would never let my son major in American Literature.”

As a humanist I would never consider eliminating the sciences from university curricula. But I have heard many people suggest the elimination of humanities from curricula. Perhaps they think the different areas of the humanities can be an interesting hobby or diversion, something to be cultivated like an art collection, or a pet, or a zoo.

Taken together, *technological imperatives* and *humaniphobia* work hand in hand to present a case for the status quo. By *status quo*, I mean the way things are such that we don’t need to question the ways things are, and, therefore, we don’t need people (humanists) or methods of study (the humanities) to question them.

For thousands of years philosophers have pondered the problem of being. That is, they have questioned in a metaphysical sense why there is something rather than nothing. But the more immediate problem of being as I see it is the problem of social being, or the problem of confronting a world that is what it is. If we do not question what is, then we succumb to the unbearable weight of *isness*. But the rationalization (and rationalization for Freud was a neurotic symptom in and of itself) of *humaniphobia* is that what is, must be; what is the case, must be the case. But as I said this is a rationalization, a way to mask the deeper more pervasive mass social neurosis that *humaniphobia* is. Therefore, I suggest therapy for us.

### **Humaniphobia Therapy**

If the humanities teach us anything at all about what it is to be human beings, we know that we are the kinds of creatures that can question. Because we can question, we can make choices.

We are not simply the subjects in some sort of evolutionary imperative. We are active co-creators of our own future. We evolve, we become new and different sorts of creatures in part because of the choices we make. Universities are institutions dedicated to the creation of the future. We no longer sit around the fire listening to the elders tell us stories about our ancestors so that we can reproduce their beliefs and actions. We have universities which are dedicated to pushing traditions to their limits and even to bursting them asunder to create new ways of being. Universities value *anti-tradition*. And the core of that anti-traditional aspect of the university is the disciplines collectively known as the humanities—those disciplines dedicated to the cultivation and study of the human imagination.

Thomas Jefferson, in his “Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia.” August 4, 1818, (in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*. The Library of America, 1984), advocated mandatory education for all at the primary school level. He listed the objects of primary education:

- To improve, by reading, his morals and faculties;
- To understand his duties to his neighbors;
- To know his rights;
- To instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens (459).

The objects of “higher branches of education”:

- To form the statesmen, legislators and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend (459);
- And generally to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves (460).

But to be an example of virtue to others one must be able not to know what one is, but to imagine how one ought to be.

Another recent radio interview I heard on NPR was with the Islamic scholar Reza Aslan talking about his new anthology called *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes of the Modern Middle East*.<sup>3</sup> In that interview Aslan talked about the great Arab poet Kahlil Gibran who lived in the first half of the twentieth century. Gibran was concerned with the colonization of the Middle East by Western powers and feared the loss of an Arab identity. So Gibran wrote an essay in which he said the only way to sort of push back against Western colonialism and to create a firm sense of Arabness is through the power of invention that comes from language. It is only the poets and the writers who can create the future of the Arab world. So, the Arab language must be revived.

Gibran contrasts the poet with the imitator. The imitator is the one who does not deviate from the course set by the colonizers, for fear he will get lost; he is the one who earns his living, eats, drinks, and wears the clothes of a thousand generations before him, and so his life remains a mere echo, his whole being a mere shadow of a distant truth he neither knows anything about it, nor cares to know. The imitator, in other words, succumbs to the weight of isness, the status quo, tradition. For Gibran, the poet is the mediator between the power of invention and humanity.

And if the poet dies, language sits on his grave crying over the loss, wailing until another poet passes by and extends his hands to it. And if the poet is both the father and the mother of language, the imitator is the weaver of its shroud and the digger of its grave.

What is this power of imagination or invention Gibran talked about? It is a nation's resolve to move ever forward. As Aslan explained, "It is in the nation's heart, a hunger and thirst for the unknown, and in its soul a chain of dreams that the nation seeks to realize day and night, and every time one of the links in the chain is realized, life adds another one." Many of the poets and writers whose work appeared in Aslan's new book were quickly made to be enemies of those states. Many of them were imprisoned by the very same governments that they helped put into power. Thus, humanists are the enemies of a state defined by economic and *technological imperatives* and dominated by *humaniphobia*. It's not comfortable to be called an enemy. But if I say you are an enemy of injustice, the label, "enemy" takes on a certain noble quality. So maybe you should embrace the label of "enemy," an enemy of that which is stultifying, of that which contributes to the weight of isness, the status quo.

In 1907, William James, the esteemed Harvard philosopher and brother of the great American novelist, Henry James, gave an address at Radcliffe College entitled, "The Social Value of the College-Bred" (in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, The Library of America, 1987). In that address he said the basic mission of the humanities is simply this: "It should help you know a good man when you see him" (1242). "Our colleges," he said, "ought to have lit up in us a lasting relish for the better kind of man, a loss of appetite for mediocrities . . ." (1244).

Speaking of democracy and the relationship of the humanities to it, he said, ". . . if you ask in what line it is most important that a democracy like ours should have its sons and daughters skilful, you see that it is this line more than any other . . ." (i.e., "to know a good man when we see him") (1245). He goes on: "[o]ur better men *shall* show the way and we *shall* follow them; so we are brought round again to the mission of higher education in helping us to know the better kind of man whenever we see him" (1246). He states the problem of democracy simply as "Who are the kinds of men from whom our majorities shall take their cue? Whom shall they treat as rightful leaders?" (1246). People should want to avoid being "feeble caricatures of mankind, unable to know a good thing when they see it, incapable of enjoyment unless a printed label gives them leave" (1248).

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned the philosopher Martha Nussbaum and her recent book that I have avoided reading. But let me offer a quote from another one of her books that I find particularly apt given the topic of this essay:

In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs. It is not good for democracy when people vote on the basis of sentiments they have absorbed from talk-radio and have never questioned. This failure to think critically produces a democracy in which people talk at one another but never have a genuine dialogue. In such an atmosphere bad arguments pass for good arguments, and prejudice can all too easily masquerade as reason. To unmask prejudice and to secure

justice, we need argument, an essential tool of civic freedom (Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 19).

This is exactly what the humanities have to offer. Thomas Jefferson, Kahlil Gibran, William James, Martha Nussbaum, and Socrates seem to be a diverse set of characters. But I believe they were all getting at the same basic set of ideas.

Let me close by expanding on Nussbaum's reference to Socrates and his relation to the concept of democracy. As you probably know, Socrates was a great humanist, specifically a philosopher who questioned the conventional values of his day and age. As a result, he came under attack from powerful *humaniphobes* in Athenian society. They put him on trial for his life and convicted him on charges of not believing in the traditional gods of Athens and for corrupting the youth. And he was ultimately executed. What Socrates was doing, what so annoyed the *humaniphobes* of his day, is what the humanities still do and why the humanities are necessary for any society that can reasonably be called democratic. In his own defense, Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. In other words, Socrates was saying that he (and the humanities) don't teach us how to make a living; they teach us how to live.

#### Notes

1. This essay is a revised version of what was originally a presentation offered as part of the Humanities and the Urban Environment Lecture Series, College of Arts and Sciences, Florida International University, November 18, 2010.
2. Martha Nussbaum. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press, 2010.
3. Reza Aslan. *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes of the Modern Middle East*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.